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A PORTRAIT BY MARSHALL

WILLIAM Edgar Marshall, whose "Portrait of My Mother" has recently been acquired by the Museum, was born in this city in 1837 and died here only a little more than a year ago.



PORTRAIT OF MY MOTHER
BY WILLIAM E. MARSHALL

He is best known as an engraver, and his portraits of Washington (after the Athenaeum head), of Lincoln, of Grant and of a long series of political or social celebrities, such as Longfellow, Blaine, Beecher and others, are excellent and serious works. Fidelity is aimed at rather than picturesqueness, the workmanship being much like that of Asher B. Durand, who aided and encouraged Marshall in his early efforts. Like Durand, Marshall early attempted painting as well as engraving, although he never gave up the latter art. In 1864 he went to Paris, intending to enter Couture's studio. Finding that impracticable, he seems to have worked for a year or so without a master, exhibiting in the Salon of 1865 both a portrait in oil and an engraving.

His best known painting is a colossal head of Christ, four feet high on a canvas ten by seven feet, which was exhibited and much discussed in the newspapers in the early eighties. The present example is quite different. It is dated 1865 and was presumably executed immediately after his return from Paris. It shows, however, few traces of foreign influence and nothing at all of the methods of Couture, whom he desired for a master. There are traces, many and manifest, of unskilfulness and lack of familiarity with the medium, but the labor and the sincerity of the artist carries him successfully through. Even so, the main interest of the canvas comes not from its intrinsic merit, but because it is typical of a period in the artistic development of the country, the long middle period when the English influences which had been continued after colonial times by the students of West (men like Sully and Morse) had died out and we were thrown on our own meagre resources. The great lack of the time was grace or "style." Copley in his earliest work had quite as little skill as is shown here, and most of Copley's contemporaries had even less, but the colonial painters, even the least skilful had, either from training or tradition, the conception of a portrait as a picture with the sitter in a pose, the dress displayed to advantage and the whole arranged in color and composition so as to fill the frame effectively. There is nothing of that here. Of Copley's qualities there is only the laborious struggle for truth, but that gives vitality to the canvas. The sitter is reproduced faithfully and sympathetically, and the face is in accord with the manner of the painting. Such were the women of the north, who bore the five years' burden of the great war, the "plain people" in whom Lincoln trusted. Certainly the artist has not mitigated the plainness, but the very absence of grace or skill makes the record of character clearer and more convincing, and renders the canvas worth preserving as an example of what was done in America during a time peculiarly averse to the Muses.

SAMUEL ISHAM.